

The Play of the Month

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

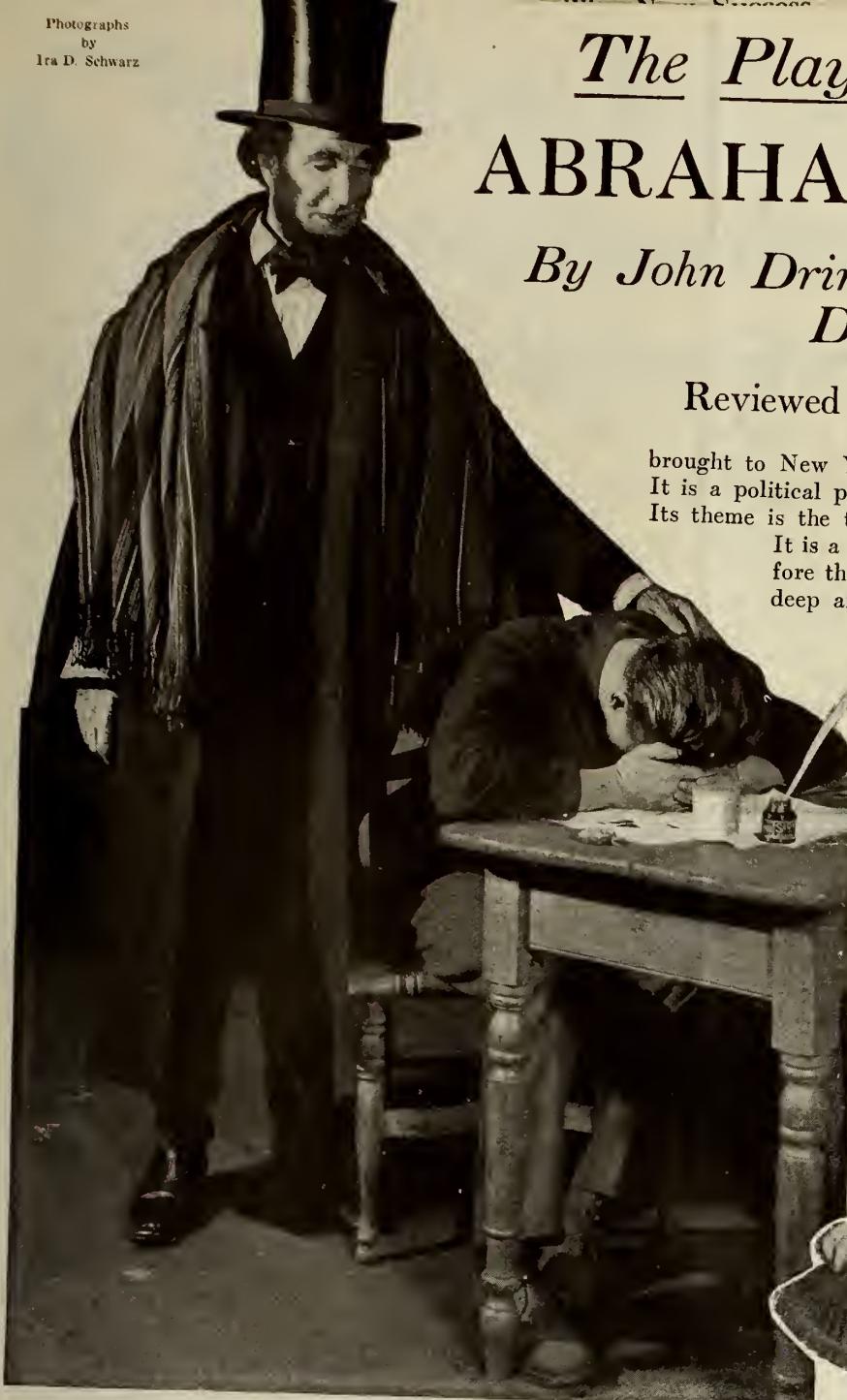
By John Drinkwater, the English Dramatist

Reviewed by ROBERT MACKAY

brought to New York. It is a play that everyone should see. It is a political play purely. It has absolutely no love interest. Its theme is the threatened separation of the North and South.

It is a profoundly moving recital of great events. Before the first act is over one feels its vague spell. A deep and practical knowledge of stage craft greatly helped Mr. Drinkwater, who disdained all stage tricks. He has handled a most gigantic theme with a most absolute simplicity. He has made many of the most telling episodes in Lincoln's life sink deep into the heart.

The curtain rises on a commonplace parlor of Lincoln's home in Springfield,



LINCOLN (*To Private Scott, whom he pardoned after being sentenced to be shot for being asleep on guard*)—"I believe you when you tell me that you couldn't keep awake. I'm going to trust you—and send you back to your regiment."

THE unbelievable thing of the stage has happened. Abraham Lincoln has been put into a play. But the hope of an American dramatist has been shattered by an Englishman. For years Lincoln has been considered seriously by almost every American playwright, but all were discouraged. The Great Emancipator was too sacred a character to be made a subject of stage tricks. To permit him to speak was considered ridiculous. He was too close to the American heart. It was like seeing one's own mother set up for public discussion.

BUT London is a long way from New York, and the Englishman doesn't see things with our eyes. In England, sentiment did not stand in the way, so when this great play by John Drinkwater was produced in a little suburban theater its permanent success was greatly doubted. But monarchs, princes, archbishops, and statesmen have journeyed to the "wilds" to see it. With considerable dubiety it was



JENNIE A. EUSTACE as Mrs. Otherly—"I didn't want my boy to go because I believe war to be wrong."



Abraham Lincoln

Illinois. Mr. Stone and Mr. Cuffney, old friends, are seated before the early spring fire, smoking silently. They are awaiting a delegation which is to tell Lincoln that he is to receive the nomination for President of the United States. After some commonplace chatter about the great event and the foremost question of the day—slavery—Abraham Lincoln enters. He is then about fifty years of age, and his face is still clean-shaven. He is the tall, gaunt, rugged figure so familiar to us all.

The spell that the play casts over one really begins when the citizens' delegation calls to inquire whether Mr. Lincoln will become the candidate for the Presidency of the United States. Mr. Lincoln listens to their request without displaying the slightest emotion. The scene is best described in the dialogue as follows:

Lincoln: Gentlemen, I am known to one of you only. Do you know my many disqualifications for this work?

Hind: It's only fair to say that they have been discussed freely.

Lincoln: There are some, shall we say graces, that I lack. Washington does not altogether neglect these.

Tucker: They have been spoken of. But these are days, Mr. Lincoln, if I may say so, too difficult, too dangerous, for these to weigh at the expense of other qualities that you were considered to possess.

Lincoln: If you send me, the South will have little but derision for your choice.

Hind: We believe that you'll last out their laughter.

Lincoln: I can take any man's ridicule—I'm trained to it by a . . . somewhat odd figure that it pleased God to give me, if I may so far be pleasant with you. But this slavery business will be long, and deep, and bitter. I know it. If you do me this honor, gentlemen, you must look to me for no compromise in this matter. If abolition comes in due time by constitutional means, good. I want it. But, while we will not force abolition, we will give slavery no approval, and we will not allow it to extend its boundaries by one yard. The determination is in my blood. When I was a boy I made a trip to New Orleans, and there I saw them, chained, beaten, kicked as a man would be ashamed to kick a thieving dog. And I saw a young girl driven up and down the room that the bidders might satisfy themselves. And I said then, "If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard." *A pause.*

You have no conditions to make?

Tucker: None.

THE second act shows Mr. Lincoln elected to the Presidency; and several com-

missioners of the Confederate States are urging Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, to disabuse the President's mind and withdraw the Federal troops from Fort Sumpter. Seward is



Praying for strength in his great task.



LINCOLN (Drinking a toast with Mrs. Lincoln and his friends after being notified that he would receive the nomination for President)—"I drink to the hope of honest friends—to friendship. I'll need that always for I've a queer, anxious heart. And, God bless America!"

not unsympathetic; his word with the President is not without influence; he says to the commissioners, "In the meantime, you will say nothing of this interview, beyond making your reports, which should be confidential."

But Lincoln arrives on the scene. In a second he divines an undereurrent of disloyalty. He questions the commissioners and learns the object of their visit: that the South wants the stamp of national approval upon slavery and that it will get it by threatening him—and that Seward listened to them willingly. Then follows:

Lincoln: Now, I'll give you my answer. Gentlemen, it's no good hiding this thing in a corner. It's got to be settled. I said the other day that Fort Sumter would be held as long as we could hold it. I said it because I know exactly what it means. Why are you investing it? Say, if you like, it's to establish your right of secession with no purpose of exercising it. Why do you want to establish that right? Because now we will allow no extension of slavery, and because some day we may abolish it. You can't deny it; there's no other answer.

Jennings: I see how it is. You may force freedom as much as you like, but we are to beware how we force slavery.

Lincoln: It couldn't be put better, Mr. Jennings. That's what the Union means.

THE commissioners depart. For a moment Lincoln and Seward, left alone, are silent, Lincoln pacing the room, Seward standing at the table. Then:

Lincoln: Seward, this won't do.

Seward: You don't suspect—

Lincoln: I do not. But let us be plain. No man can say how wisely, but Providence has brought me to the leadership of this country, with a task before me greater than that which rested on Washington himself. When I made my Cabinet, you were the first man I chose. I do not regret it. I think I never shall. But remember, faith earns faith. What is it? Why didn't those men come to see me?

Seward: They thought my word might bear more weight with you than theirs.

Lincoln: Your word for what?

Seward: Discretion about Fort Sumter.

Lincoln: Discretion?

Seward: It's devastating, this thought of war.

Lincoln: It is. Do you think I'm less sensible of that than you? War should be impossible. But you can only make it impossible by destroying its causes. Don't you see that to withdraw from Fort Sumter is to do nothing of the kind? If one half of this country claims the right to disown the Union, the claim in the eyes of every true guardian among us must be a cause for war, unless we hold the Union to be a false thing instead of the public consent to decent principles of life that it is. If we withdraw from Fort Sumter, we do nothing to destroy that cause. We can only destroy it by convincing them that secession is a betrayal of their trust. Please God we may do so.

Seward: Has there, perhaps, been some timidity in making all this clear to the country?

Lincoln: Timidity? And you were talking of discretion.

Seward: I mean that perhaps our policy has not been sufficiently defined.

Lincoln: And have you not concurred in all our decisions? Do not deceive yourself. You urge me to discretion in one breath and tax me with timidity in the next. While there was hope that they might call Beauregard back out of their own good sense, I was determined to say nothing to inflame them. Do you call that timidity? Now their intention is clear, and you have heard me speak this morning clearly also. And now you talk about discretion—you, who call what was discretion at the right time, timidity, now counsel timidity at the wrong time, and call it discretion. Seward, you may think I'm simple, but I can see your mind working as plainly as you might see the innards of a clock. You can bring great gifts to this government, with your zeal, and your administrative experience, and your love of men. Don't spoil it by thinking I've got a dull brain.

Seward (slowly): Yes, I see. I've not been thinking quite clearly about it all.

Lincoln (taking a paper from his pocket): Here's the paper you sent me. "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration. Great Britain . . . Russia . . . Mexico . . . policy. Either the President must control this himself, or devolve it on some member of his Cabinet. It is not in my especial province, but I neither seek to evade nor assume responsibility."

There is a pause, the two men looking at each other without speaking. LINCOLN hands the paper to SEWARD, who holds it for a moment, tears it up, and throws it into his basket.

Seward: I beg your pardon.

Lincoln (taking his hand): That's brave of you.

Was a great man ever taken down more courageously?

TWO years later Mr. Lincoln is seen (Act III) in a small reception room in the White House. Here many touching scenes occur; but, perhaps, none is so effective as that which opens with the exit of Lincoln, when he says to Susan, his servant: "If a gentleman named Mr. William Custis calls, ask him to wait in here."

Lincoln goes out. Susan collects some teacups; and as she is going toward the door a quiet, grave, white-haired negro appears facing her. Susan starts violently:

Susan: And who in the name of night might you be?

The Negro: Mista William Custis. Mista Lincoln tell me to come here. Nobody stop me, so I come to look for him.

Susan: Are you Mr. William Custis?

Custis: Yes.

Susan: Mr. Lincoln will be here directly. He's gone to change his coat. You'd better sit down.

Custis: Yes.

He does so, looking about him with a certain pathetic inquisitiveness. Finally, SUSAN exits, and MR. LINCOLN enters.

Lincoln: Mr. Custis, I'm very glad to see you.

He offers his hand. CUSTIS takes it and is about to kiss it, as he kneels before LINCOLN. LINCOLN stops him gently.

(Sitting): Sit down, will you?

Custis (still standing, keeping his hat in his hands): It very kind of Mista Lincoln ask me to come to see him.

Lincoln: I was afraid you might refuse. Please sit down.

Custis: Polite?

Lincoln: Please. I can't sit myself, you see, if you don't.

Custis: Black, black. White, white.

Lincoln: Nonsense. Just two old men, sitting together—and talking.

ONE of the most far-reaching episodes shown is a meeting of the Cabinet. Stanton has been appointed Secretary of War. Mr. Drinkwater, in order to produce an important situation of the period—the feeling of the many people arraigned against Lincoln at that time—created a cabinet member by the name of Hook.

Every President during a great crisis has become unpopular. Lincoln was no exception to the rule—neither was Washington. In a free country like ours people are quick to take exceptions—each one feeling his right to think for himself. But when time has measured the acts, the will, the deeds and the mind of the President, it has always left him a great, a revered hero.

Hook is well introduced by Mr. Drinkwater. Without this character one important phase of the career of Lincoln would have been omitted. While the Cabinet members are waiting for Lincoln, this conversation takes place:

Hook: He will bring up his proclamation again. In my opinion it is inopportune.

Seward: Well, we've learnt by now that the President is the best man among us.

(Continued on page 46)



JOHN DRINKWATER

Author of "Abraham Lincoln."

Abraham Lincoln

Hook: There's a good deal of feeling against him everywhere, I find.

Blair: He's the one man with character enough for this business.

Hook: There are other opinions.

Seward: Yes, but not here, surely.

Hook: It's not for me to say. But I ask you, what does he mean about emancipation? I've always understood that it was the Union we were fighting for, and that abolition was to be kept in our minds for legislation at the right moment. And now one day he talks as though emancipation were his only concern, and the next as though he would throw up the whole idea, if by doing it he could secure peace with the establishment of the Union. Where are we?

M R. LINCOLN finally enters. But instead of jumping at once into the main reason for the meeting—the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation—the President sits down and says: "It's an exciting morning. I feel rather excited myself. I find my mind not its best in excitement." Then he opens a small book and starts to read, saying, "It may compose us all. It is Mr. Artemus Ward's latest." The Cabinet, with the exception of Hook, who makes no attempt to hide his irritation, and Stanton, who would do the same but for his disapproval of Hook, listen with good-humored patience while the President reads one of Ward's amusing stories. Finally he finishes:

Stanton: May we now consider affairs of State.

Hook: Yes, we may.

Lincoln: Mr. Hook says, Yes, we may.

Stanton: Thank you.

Lincoln: Oh, no. Thank Mr. Hook.

THE proclamation is read and discussed, Hook objecting openly. Finally the meeting is over and the members depart, all but Hook, who is the last to rise. He moves away without shaking the President's hand. And here is where Mr. Drinkwater shows how many of Lincoln's countrymen regarded him:

Lincoln: Hook.

Hook: Yes, Mr. President.

Lincoln: Hook, one cannot help hearing things.

Hook: I beg your pardon?

Lincoln: Hook, there's a way some people have, when a man says a disagreeable thing, of asking him to repeat it, hoping to embarrass him. It's often effective. But I'm not easily embarrassed. I said one cannot help hearing things.

Hook: And I do not understand what you mean, Mr. President.

Lincoln: Come, Hook, we're alone. Lincoln is a good enough name. And I think you understand.

Hook: How should I?

Lincoln: Then, plainly, there are intrigues going on.

Hook: Against the government?

Lincoln: No. In it. Against me.

Hook: Criticism, perhaps.

Lincoln: To what end? To better my ways?

Hook: I presume that might be the purpose.

Lincoln: Then, why am I not told what it is?

Hook: I imagine it's a natural compunction.

Lincoln: Or ambition.

Hook: What do you mean?

Lincoln: You think you ought to be in my place.

Hook: You are well informed.

Lincoln: You cannot imagine why every one does not see that you ought to be in my place.

Hook: By what right do you say that?

Lincoln: Is it not true?

Hook: You take me unprepared. You have me at a disadvantage.

Lincoln: You speak as a very scrupulous man, Hook.

Hook: Do you question my honor?

Lincoln: As you will.

Hook: Then I resign.

Lincoln: As a protest against—?

Hook: Your suspicion.

Lincoln: It is false?

Hook: Very well, I will be frank. I mistrust your judgment.

Lincoln: In what?

Hook: Generally. You over-emphasize abolition.

Lincoln: You don't mean that. You mean that you fear possible public feeling against abolition.

Hook: It must be persuaded, not forced.

Lincoln: All the most worthy elements in it are persuaded. But

the ungenerous elements make the most noise, and you hear them only. You will run from the terrible name of Abolitionist even when it is pronounced by worthless creatures whom you know you have every reason to despise.

Hook: You have, in my opinion, failed in necessary firmness in saying what will be the individual penalties of rebellion.

Lincoln: This is a war. I will not allow it to become a blood-feud.

Hook: We are fighting treason. We must meet it with severity.

Lincoln: We will defeat treason. And I will meet it with conciliation.

Hook: It is a policy of weakness.

Lincoln: It is a policy of faith—it is a policy of compassion. (Warmly.) Hook, why do you plague me with these jealousies? Once before I found a member of my Cabinet working behind my back. But he was disinterested, and he made amends nobly. But, Hook, you have allowed the burden of these days to sour you. I know it all. I've watched you plotting and plotting for authority. And I, who am a lonely man, have been sick at heart. So great is the task God has given to my hand, and so few are my days, and my deepest hunger is always for loyalty in my own house. You have withheld it from me. You have done great service in your office, but you have grown envious. Now you resign, as you did once before when I came openly to you in friendship. And you think that again I shall flatter you and coax you to stay. I don't think I ought to do it. I will not do it. I must take you at your word.

Hook: I am content.

He turns to go.

Lincoln: Will you shake hands?

Hook: I beg you will excuse me.

He goes. LINCOLN stands silently for a moment, a troubled, lonely captain.

THE character of Mr. Lincoln is portrayed by Mr. Frank McGlynn in an exceedingly successful way. The actor makes Mr. Lincoln exactly what history declares he was—a dignified man, with a profound sense of humor and a deep-seated human philosophy. At times Mr. McGlynn moves the audience to tears with his quiet, solemn profundity, especially in the scene where he pardons Private Scott, convicted of being asleep while on guard.

But the most heart-breaking scene is when Mr. Lincoln is shot. The assassination is not seen by the audience. Only the entrance to Lincoln's box in Ford's Theatre is visible; but when Booth enters, pistol in hand and fires the shot it is a realistic moment. One can see the great tree falling to earth and "leaving an open spot against the sky," as Edwin Markham describes it. Then comes the cry, "The President is shot!" And over the babel and buzz of sound, one hears the strident voice of Booth crying "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" You see nothing; you only hear; but you have the feeling very deep within you to rush to the stricken President's side.

And while the pang is still gripping your heart, Edwin M. Stanton, Mr. Lincoln's Secretary of War, quietly walks out of the box and says: "He belongs to the ages." This was the remark which Mr. Stanton made at Lincoln's bedside when he died, but Mr. Drinkwater was obliged to take some liberties with history, and he could not have found a more appropriate line with which to end his play.

IT was in this mood that Abraham Lincoln was placed upon the stage. Never in the history of time has a man so written himself into the memories of men and in so short a period after his death. It is the elements described in this play which have stirred artists, poets, and sculptors, and set up Lincoln as a popular hero in the minds of common people. First of all, as Mr. Drinkwater shows, there was his unfailing integrity of character; secondly, that he died still adequate to the situation that he had brought about. Public life is strewn with men who were inadequate to the great trust placed upon them. But Lincoln never fell below the standard he set for himself, nor did he ever get out of touch with the common people.

That is the philosophy that Mr. Drinkwater has endeavored to produce in his simple, compelling and tensely interesting drama.

